

Commonwealth Literature – its Trends and Development with an Overview of Australian and Canadian Literatures

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Definition and Recognition:

Commonwealth Literature is generally believed to refer to the literary products of the independent countries of Africa, Asia, the Caribbeans and North America which were once colonised by the United Kingdom. The works of writers from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Ireland, Scotland, Africa, Pakistan, West-Indies and Arab countries are therefore regarded as Commonwealth Literature. It demonstrates the inherent connections between Geography and History and between theme and subject matter in a particular resonant way. This creative literature is distinguished as black Commonwealth Literature and white Commonwealth Literature on the colour of the people's skin. Commonwealth Literature gained its recognition in 1976, when Patrick White, an Australian Novelist was awarded a Noble Prize that year.

Universality:

Commonwealth Literature gives us pleasure and enjoyment as is more relevant to us than the American or the British Literature. It is familiar and near to us and reflects our own problems. It has the universality of all the great writers. Some characteristics are shared commonly by all the Commonwealth Literature writers and differences as well. One can observe a common thread running through this Literature with certain common characters. But each has its own thought, distinct identity and individuality. This Literature marks it off with certain uniqueness. There is veridity in the Commonwealth Literature and in their national identity they cannot stand close to each other. William Walsh says that the germ of the Commonwealth Literature is in the expansionist phase of the British Empire.

The Colonial Phase :

When the British Empire expanded, it started exercising its authority over the colonies. The English convicts are exiled to go to the new countries and during this colonial period, the Commonwealth countries were ruled by the mother country. The tendency of this period is to

imitate the writers of the people and thus the first phase of the Christian Commonwealth Literature is imitative. The writers of England were their models. But there is dissatisfaction in these countries for the British rule and literature in this period is called the Revolutionary Literature which is highly patriotic. To look to England, to models and to their mother-tongue is the nature of the writers of this period.

The Revolutionary Phase :

The second phase is the revolutionary phase during which the spirit of nationalism asserted itself in the countries. The exchange of words is transferred to the exchange of blood. A patriotic sentiment filled the minds of the people and a declaration of a desire for independence made them to follow the attainment of independence.

The Renaissance Phase :

Then the third phase of this Literature is led by a feeling of faithful reflection of its country, tradition, heritage, life and philosophy. The Literature of this phase has projected a sense of identity, self-awareness or self-consciousness. It has also projected of its aspirations, culture, habits etc. A writer of this period turns to portray the problems of his own country thus making this Literature limited and regional, but it has its own universal appeal. As a matter of fact, any Literature to that respect is an expression at length and deals with the fundamental problems. Then it acquires vigour, quality and richness. The writers are concerned for a search to identity and they want to write what is typical their own and thus exhibited a historical development of Literature in these countries. The third phase of the Commonwealth Literature is the Renaissance of Literature.

Common Language :

The English language usage is a common feature of this Literature. The concept of Commonwealth Literature is not strictly varied. The writers of Commonwealth countries are engaged on writing in the same language as if there is a union between them similar to each other. They are at the same time different in their religion, philosophy, morality, ethics, customs and traditions. There is a great deal of diversity which confines the self-identity. Actually there are the binding links of this Literature – Colonial experience, struggle for independence and search for identity.

Physical Description :

In the fifth phase of this Literature, all the writers turned their attention to the physical description of their own country. “Observe, understand, absorb and then describe” is the response

of the Commonwealth Literature writers to the landscape of their country. The physical description contains the physical identity.

These similarities have in turn brought about the development of broad resemblances of theme and subject matter as well as of technical approaches and patterns of growth. For example, many works of Commonwealth Literature are distinguished by the examination of physical and psychological displacement brought about as a result of slavery, voluntary or forced migration and colonialism.

Australian Literature :

Australia is a country which underwent a historical experience least conducive to literary development. The British specifically designated it as a penal colony when it was first colonized in 1788. This means that it was the place where convicted criminals in Britain were sent as punishment for a variety of petty and serious crimes. As a result of this process of transportation, many people came to Australia unwillingly and in conditions of great deprivation and misery. In addition to this, often harsh climatic conditions, the relatively small population and the huge size of the country combined to make literary activity a difficult undertaking.

Australian Poetry in the early years was unoriginal and strongly derivative of 18th Century English Poetry. The works of poets like Barron Field (1786-1846), William Charles Wentworth (1792-1872) and Charles Harpur (1813-1868) are in this tradition. However in the 1890s there were significant developments in Australian Literature generally. The notion of Australia as “The Modern Utopia” gained wide currency and the country began to acquire greater significance in its own right, rather than merely as an appendage of Britain in this period. Moreover, there emerged a series of literary journals like the Lone Hand, the Book Fellow and the Triad, which devoted themselves to the promotion of Australian Literature and the development of an enlightened readership. The so-called Australian bush ballads were the most significant development of the Australian Nineties. They were literary ballads written on the model of the anonymously authored songs that were rendered by cattlemen and farmers in Australia’s “Outback”, the local term for the country’s immense hinterland. Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-1870) and Andrew Barton Paterson (1864-1941) were the best known exponents of the form. The growing independence of Australian Literature during this period was demonstrated in the rise of Christopher John Brennan (1870-1932), one of the greatest poets of this period. He sought to discover and express poetry and a philosophy that could unify diverse, actual and imaginative experience and the uniqueness of his writing stems from his attempts to achieve this. Another outstanding poet of the Nineties was John Shaw Neilson (1872-1942), described as one of the country’s “greatest writers of light

lyrics". His delight in natural beauty helped to further establish the landscape as an object of the poetic imagination.

In the modern era, Australian poetry has continued to build upon the models provided by the above poets and the growing perceptions of Australian independence of thought and action, particularly after the First World War. These have been manifested mainly in increasingly experimental approaches to the examination of various issues and themes.

As in the poetry, developments in Australian Prose were very uneven. Like the poetry, much of the fiction was highly derivative and grew along the patterns established in England and the major influences were Daniel Defoe, Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. Many of the novels were melodramatic tales of English immigrants who came to Australia, made good and sought to leave the country as rapidly as possible. "Geoffrey Hamlyn" by Henry Kingsley (1830-1876) is the prime example of this writing. Marcus Charles "For the Term of His Natural Life" (1874) and "Robbery Under Arms" (1888) by Rolf Boldrewood are the two novels important for their attempts to describe the landscape of Australia on its own terms as opposed to seeing it from the often-jaundiced view point of a visitor.

Joseph Furphy (1843-1912) is widely regarded as Australia's first great novelist, and "Such is Life" (1903) crystallizes some of the most positive elements of an emerging literature that was at last beginning to emerge from the shadows of imperial influence. Another important novelist of this era was Mrs. J.G. Robertson (1870-1946), who wrote under the pseudonym Henry Handel Richardson. Her most significant work is Coonardoo (1936) and it is regarded as one of the best examinations of the mixed-race theme in Australian Literature. The Australian novel rose to its greatest heights in the work of Patrick White who has acquired a distinguished international reputation with novels like "The Tree of Man" (1955) and "Voss" (1957). In recent times, greater prominence has been given to the literature of indigenous aboriginal writing. As this process continues, it is expected that Australian Literature will continue to demonstrate originality and relevance.

To conclude, we have in Commonwealth Literature the supreme advantage of communicating with people in more than half the globe and yet what we communicate is what is peculiarly our own in the depths of our being. The study of Commonwealth Literature has great surprises to the readers as it is a great adventure for the mind of man.

Canadian Literature :

Canadian Literature has been deeply affected by perceptions of its ambivalent status. Canada has been regarded as an inescapable question mark, a shape without form, a nagging puzzle despite its size. Such a seeming lack of solidity is encapsulated in the paradoxes which structure it; a people divided among themselves by race and language; a British colony which has thrown off colonialism; an American Nation, Nation which stands stubbornly apart from the United States of America.

During the colonial era, literary activities were complicated by the existence of both French and British cultures as well as the presence of a flourishing U.S culture to the South. Much of the early literature was purely provincial or historical interest and dependent on established European literary tradition. The fundamental task of describing the local landscape and conditions rather than those of Europe was undertaken. R.E. Rashley calls the “Survey Poem” achieved this to a large extent. In these poems, the writer portrays a specific locale and uses it to make larger comments on the uniqueness and validity of the New World as opposed to Europe. Oliver Goldsmith’s poem ‘The Rising Village (1825), Joseph Howe’s ‘Acadia’ (about 1830), William Kirby’s ‘The United Empire’ (1859) and Alexander Mc Lachlan’s ‘The Emigrant’ (1861) come under this tradition. These poets described the magnificent scenery of their country and also wrote about the experiences of the immigrants engaged in building a modern nation out of the wilderness. Thus the poets had laid concrete foundations for the realisation of Canada in literature as was being done in the political and economic spheres. Poetry of this kind helped in reducing the influence of the European tradition and its blandness.

The Canadian identity had been enhanced and led to the development of thriving regional centres of literacy production because of this emphasis upon locale description. The most prominent were those in Nova Scotia and what is now Ontario and Quebec. Apart from Goldsmith, Nova Scotia produced writers like Joseph Howe (1804 – 1873) and Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1795 – 1865). The literary development of Ontario and Quebec was enhanced by the emergence of periodicals like ‘The Scribbler’, the Canadian Magazine and ‘The Canadian Review’. All these were based in Montreal which soon became the Literary Capital of Canada. In 1824, the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec was also established there. Another Montreal – based journal, ‘The Literary Garland’ sought to promote European standards of Civilisation. Two early French – Canadian poets from this era are Albert Lozean (1878 – 1924) and Emile Nelligan (1879 – 1941). Nelligan is significant for being one of the first poets on the North American Continent to be influenced by the French Symbolists.

The English – Canadian poets came to the fore in the 1920s. One of the foremost was Edwin J. Pratt (1883 – 1964). His poetry is distinguished by an acute observation of urban and rural Canadian life. Pratt's major effect on his contemporaries was to establish the appropriateness of all aspects of Canadian life as a subject for poetry. F.R. Scot (1899 – 1985) is one of the poets of the 'Montreal School'. His poetry is a reflection of an active public life as well as an overt preoccupation with the condition of Canadian Society. This is seen in poems like 'The Witches' Brew' (1925) and 'The Titanic' (1935). Abraham M. Klein was another most talented poet of the Montreal School. Nature, revolution and alienation are recurring themes in his poetry. His last poetry is a reflection of his Jewish heritage and the trauma of the Second World War. Contemporary Canadian Poetry has notable names like Margaret Atwood and Robert Kroetsch.

Canadian fiction appeared later than the poetry. Its development followed a similar route, namely the appearance of early works that were overly initiative of outdated European models followed by increasingly successful attempts to write about authentic Canadian experience. The novel emerged in Canada less rapidly than the poetry because the Country lack the established social structures upon which fiction flourishes. Much of the earliest fiction was regional in nature, concentrating upon the concerns and perceptions of the various provinces. Hence between 1860 and 1920, the fictional writing can be divided into many regional types, in addition to the broad division between French – Canadian and British – Canadian fiction. The historical romance was the most type of fiction in the 19th Century Canadian Literature. Many writers of the era saw nothing in contemporary times worthy of treatment and therefore preferred to go to the past, either of the Old World or Canada itself. One of the examples of the historical romance is 'Wacousta' (1832) by John Richardson which deals with an 18th Century Indian rebellion. Others are Gilbert Parker's 'Seats of the Mighty' (1896) and William Kirby's 'The Golden Dog' (1877).

Canadian fiction had truly emerged by the beginning of the 20th Century. Morely Callaghan's style was influenced by the American writer Ernest Hemmingway, who had first encouraged him to write. He replicates the grim realities of modern urban life and their consequences for the individual in his novels 'Strange Fugitive' (1928), 'It's never over' (1930) and 'Such is My Beloved' (1934). The most prominent French – Canadian novelist of this era was Gabrielle Roy, like Callaghan, her approach to her subjects was not sentimental. Her first novel 'The Tin Flute' (1945) is a study of Montreal slum life. This novel was translated in 1947. She was also one of the first novelists to write a 'psychological' novel when she published 'The Cashier' (1954, translated in 1955). Historical fiction has become after 1960s. The most prominent writers of historical fiction has become popular after 1960s. The most prominent

writers of historical fiction are Margaret Atwood, Yves Beauchemin, Anne Herbert and Mordecai Richler.

In conclusion, the Canadian Literature had begun to develop with new themes and styles. The problems of urban life, particularly as these affected the lives of individuals, the perceived 'Americanisation' of Canadian life culture, women's issues and the concept of the Utopian Society are some of the contents published in the books. The contemporary novelists experimented with a wide variety of structures and approaches, including symbolic narrative, psychology, post-modern parody and pastiche.

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